The Last World of Mr Goddard

by James Graham Ballard, 1930-2009

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For no apparent reason, the thunder particularly irritated Mr Goddard. All day, as he moved about his duties as ground floor supervisor, he listened to it booming and rolling in the distance, almost lost amid the noise and traffic of the department store. Twice, on some pretext, he took the lift up to the roof-top cafeteria and carefully scanned the sky, searching the horizons for any sign of storm-cloud or turbulence. As usual, however, the sky was a bland, impassive blue, mottled by a few clumps of leisurely cumuli.

This was what worried Mr Goddard. Leaning on the cafeteria railing he could hear the thunder distinctly, cleaving the air only a thousand feet above his head, the huge claps lumbering past like the colliding wing streams of enormous birds. Intermittently the sounds would stop, to re-start a few minutes later.

Mr Goddard was not the only one to notice them—the people at the tables on the terrace were craning up at the sourceless din, as perplexed as himself. Normally Mr Goddard would have exchanged some pleasantry with them—his elderly grey-haired figure in its old-world herringbone suit had been a byword for kindly concern for over twenty years—but today he hurried past without even looking at them. Down on the ground floor he felt less uneasy, but throughout the afternoon, while he roved among the busy counters, patting the children on the head, he listened to the thunder sounding faintly in the distance, inexplicable and strangely threatening.

At six o'clock he took up his position in the time-keeper's booth, waited impatiently until the final time card had been stamped, then handed over to the night watchman, and the last of the staff had left for home. As he made his way out, pulling on his ancient overcoat and deerstalker, the clear evening air was still stirred by occasional rumblings.

Mr Goddard's house was less than half a mile away, a small two-storey villa surrounded by tall hedges. Superficially dilapidated though still sound, at first glance it was indistinguishable from any other bachelor residence, although anyone entering the short drive would have noticed one unusual feature—all the windows, both upstairs and down, were securely shuttered. Indeed, they had remained shuttered for so long that the ivy growing across the front of the house had matted itself through the wooden slats, here and there pulling apart the rotting wood.

Closer inspection at these points would have revealed, behind the dusty panes, the interlocking diagonals of steel grilles.

Collecting a bottle of milk off the doorstep, Mr Goddard let himself into the kitchen. This was furnished with an armchair and a small couch, and served him as his living room. He busied himself preparing an evening meal. Halfway through, a neighbouring cat, a regular visitor, scratched at the door and was allowed in. They sat at the table together, the cat on its customary cushion up on one of the chairs, watching Mr Goddard with its small, hard eyes.

Shortly before eight o'clock Mr Goddard began his invariable evening routine. Opening the kitchen door, he glanced up and down the side entrance, then locked it behind him, securing both windows and door with a heavy drop bar. He next entered the hall, ushering the cat before him, and began his inspection of the house.

This was done with great care, using the cat as his sixth sense. Mr Goddard watched it carefully, noting its reactions as it wandered softly through the deserted rooms, singing remotely to itself.

The house was completely empty. Upstairs the floorboards were bare, the windows without curtains, lamp bulbs shadeless. Dust gathered in the corners and stained the fraying Victorian wallpaper. All the fireplaces had been bricked up, and the bare stonework above the mantels showed that the chimneys had been solidly filled in.

Once or twice Mr Goddard tested the grilles, which effectively turned the room into a succession of steel cages. Satisfied, he made his way downstairs and went into the front room, noting that nothing was amiss. He steered the cat into the

kitchen, poured it a bowl of milk as a reward and slipped back into the hallway, latching the door behind him.

One room he had still not entered—the real lounge. Taking a key from his pocket, Mr Goddard turned the lock and let himself through.

Like the other rooms, this was bare and unfurnished, except for a wooden chair and a large black safe that stood with its back to one wall. The other distinctive feature was a single light bulb of considerable power suspended on an intricate pulley system from the centre of the ceiling.

Buttoning his jacket, Mr Goddard went over to the safe. Massive and ancient, it was approximately three feet wide and deep. Once it had been painted a dark bottle green, but by now most of the paint had peeled, revealing a dull black steel. A huge door, the full width and depth of the safe, was recessed into its face.

Beside the safe was the chair, a celluloid visor slung over its back. Mr Goddard pulled this on, giving himself the look of a refined elderly counterfeiter about to settle down to a hard evening's work. From his key chain he selected a small silver key, and fitted it into the lock. Turning the handle full circle, he drew the caissons back into the door, then pulled steadily with both hands and swung it open.

The safe was without shelves, a single continuous vault. Occupying the entire cavity, separated from the three-inch-thick walls by a narrow interval, was a large black tin document box.

Pausing to regain his breath, Mr Goddard heard a dull rumble of thunder sound through the darkness beyond the shuttered windows. Frowning involuntarily, he suddenly noticed a feathery thudding noise coming from inside the safe. He bent down and was just in time to see a large white moth emerge from the space above the document box, ricocheting erratically off the roof, at each impact sending a dull echo reverberating through the tin walls.

Mr Goddard smiled broadly to himself, as if divining something that had puzzled him all day. Leaning on the safe, he watched the moth circle the light, frantically shaking to pieces its damaged wings. Finally it plunged into one of the walls and fell stunned to the floor. Mr Goddard went over and swept it through the door with his foot, then returned to the safe. Reaching inside, with great care he lifted the document box out by the handles fastened to the centre of the lid.

The box was heavy. It required all Mr Goddard's efforts to steer it out without banging it against the safe, but with long practice he withdrew it in a single motion. He placed it gently on the floor, pulled up the chair and lowered the light until it was a few inches above his head. Releasing a catch below the lid, he tilted it back on its hinges.

Below him, brightly reflected in the light, was what appeared to be an elaborate doll's house. In fact, however, it was a whole complex of miniature buildings, perfectly constructed models with carefully detailed roof-tops and cornices, walls and brickwork so exactly duplicating the original that but for the penumbral figure of Mr Goddard looming out of the darkness they might have passed for real buildings and houses. The doors and windows were exquisitely worked, fitted with minute lattices and panes, each the size of a soap flake. The paving stones, the street furniture, the camber of the roadways, were perfect scale reductions.

The tallest building in the box was about fourteen inches high, containing six storeys. It stood at one corner of a crossroads that traversed the centre of the box,

and was obviously a replica of the department store at which Mr Goddard worked. Its interior had been furnished and decorated with as much care as its external fa□ ade; through the windows could be seen the successive floors laid out with their miniature merchandise, rolls of carpet on the first, lingerie and women's fashions on the second, furniture on the third. The roof-top cafeteria had been equipped with small metal chairs and tables, set with plates, cutlery and bowls of tiny flowers.

On the corners to the left and right of the store were the bank and supermarket, with the town hall diagonally opposite. Again, these were perfect replicas of their originals: in the drawers behind the counters in the bank were bundles of minuscule banknotes, a glitter of coins like heaps of silver dust. The interior of the supermarket was an exercise in a thousand virtuosities. The stalls were stacked with pyramids of tins and coloured packets almost too small for the eye to distinguish.

Beyond the buildings dominating the crossroads were the lesser shops and premises lining the side-streets—the drapers, a public house, shoeshops and tobacconists. Looking around, the entire town seemed to stretch away into the distance. The walls of the box had been painted so skilfully, with such clever control of perspective, that it was almost impossible to tell where the models ended and the walls intervened. The micro-cosmic world was so perfect in its own right, the illusion of reality so absolute that it appeared to be the town itself, its very dimensions those of reality.

Suddenly, through the warm early morning sunlight, a shadow moved. The glass door of one of the shoeshops opened, a figure stepped out for a moment onto the pavement, glanced up and down the still deserted street, then retreated into the dark recesses of the shop's interior. A middle-aged man in a grey suit and white collar, it was presumably the manager opening the shop in the morning. In agreement with this, a second doorway opened farther down the street; and this time a woman came out of a hairdresser's, and began to wind down the blind. She wore a black skirt and pink plastic smock. As she went back into the salon she waved to someone walking down the street towards the town hall.

More figures emerged from the doorways, strolled along the pavements talking to each other, starting the day's business. Soon the streets were full; the offices over the shops came to life, typists moving in among the desks and filing cabinets. Signs were put up or taken down; calendars moved on. The first customers arrived at the department store and supermarket, ambled past the fresh counter displays. At the town hall clerks sat at their ledgers, in their private offices behind the oak panelling the senior officials had their first cups of tea. Like a well-ordered hive, the town came to life.

High above it all, his gigantic face hidden in the shadows, Mr Goddard quietly watched his lilliputian scene like a discreet aged Gulliver. He sat forward, the green shade shielding his eyes, hands clasped lightly in his lap. Occasionally he would lean over a few inches to catch a closer glimpse of the figures below him, or tilt his head to see into one of the shops or offices. His face showed no emotion, he seemed content to be simply a spectator. Two feet away the hundreds of tiny figures moved about their lives, and a low murmur of street noises crept out into the room.

The tallest of the figures were no more than an inch and a half in height, yet their perfectly formed faces were completely furnished with character and expression. Most of them Mr Goddard knew by sight, many by name. He saw Mrs Hamilton, the lingerie buyer, late for work, hurrying down the alleyway to the staff entrance. Through a window he could see the managing director‘s office, where Mr Sellings was delivering his usual weekly pep-talk to a trio of department heads. In the streets outside were scores of regular customers Mr Goddard had known intimately for years, buying their groceries, posting their letters, exchanging gossip.

As the scene below him unfolded, Mr Goddard gradually edged nearer the box, taking a particular interest in two or three of the score of separate tableaux. An interesting feature of his vantage point was that by some freak of architecture or perspective it afforded him a multiplicity of perfect angles by which to observe almost every one of the diminutive figures. The high windows of the bank provided him with a view of each of the clerks at their counters; a transom beyond exposed the strongroom, the rows of deposit boxes on their shelves behind the grille, one of the junior cashiers amusing himself by reading the labels. The department store, with its wide floors, he could cover merely by inclining his head. The smaller shops along the streets were just as exposed. Rarely more than two rooms deep, their rear windows and fanlights provided him all the access he needed. Nothing escaped Mr Goddard’s scrutiny. In the back alleys he could see the stacked bicycles, the charwomen‘s mops in their buckets by the basement doors, the dustbins half-filled with refuse.

The first scene to attract Mr Goddard‘s attention was one involving the stockroom supervisor at the store, Mr Durrant. Casting his eye at random through the bank, Mr Goddard noticed him in the manager’s office, leaning across the latter‘s desk and explaining something earnestly. Usually Durrant would have been a member of the group being harangued by Mr Sellings, and only urgent business could have taken him to the bank. The manager, however, appeared to be doing what he could to get rid of Durrant, avoiding his face and fiddling with some papers. Suddenly Durrant lost his temper. Tie askew, he began to shout angrily. The manager accepted this silently, shaking his head slowly with a bleak smile. Finally Durrant strode to the door, hesitated with a look of bitter reproach, and stalked out.

Leaving the bank, and apparently oblivious of his duties at the store, he walked briskly down the High Street. Stopping at the hairdresser‘s, he went in and made his way through to a private booth at the back where a large man in a check suit, still wearing a green trilby, was being shaved. Mr Goddard watched their conversation through a skylight above them. The man in the chair, the local bookmaker, lay back silently behind his lather until Durrant finished talking, then with a casual flip of one hand waved him to a seat.

Putting two and two together, Mr Goddard waited with interest for their conversation to be resumed. What he had just seen confirmed suspicions recently prompted by Durrant‘s distracted manner.

However, just as the bookmaker pulled off the towel and stood up, something more important caught Mr Goddard‘s eye.

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Directly behind the department store was a small cul-de-sac sealed off from the alleyway leading in from the street by high wooden doors. It was piled with old packing cases and miscellaneous refuse, and its far side was formed by the rear wall of the box, a sheer cliff that rose straight up into the distant glare above. The glazed windows of a service lift shaft overlooked the yard, topped on the fifth floor by a small balcony.

It was this balcony that had attracted Mr Goddard‘s attention. Two men were crouched on it, manipulating a long wooden contraption that Mr Goddard identified as a telescopic ladder. Together they hoisted it into the air, and by pulling on a system of ropes extended it against the wall to a point about fifteen feet above their heads. Satisfied, they lashed the lower end securely to the balcony railings; then one of them mounted the ladder and climbed up to its topmost rung, arms outstretched across the wall, high over the yard below.

They were trying to escape from the box! Mr Goddard hunched forward, watching them with astonishment. The top of the ladder was still seven or eight inches from the overhanging rim of the box, thirty or forty feet away from the men on the balcony, but their industry was impressive. He watched them motionlessly while they tightened the guyropes.

Dimly, in the distance, midnight chimed. Mr Goddard looked at his watch, then without a further glance into the box pushed the lamp towards the ceiling and lowered the lid. He stood up and carried the box carefully to the safe, stowed it away, and sealed the door. Switching off the light, he let himself noiselessly out of the room.

The next day at the store Mr Goddard made his usual rounds, dispensing his invariable prescription of friendly chatter and bonhomie to sales assistants and customers alike, making full use of the countless trivial insights he had been provided with the previous evening. All the while he kept a constant lookout for Mr Durrant; reluctant to interfere, he was nevertheless afraid that without some drastic re-direction of the man‘s fortunes his entanglement with the bookmaker would soon end in tragedy.

No one in the stockrooms had seen Durrant all morning, but shortly after 12 o‘clock Mr Goddard spotted him hurrying down the street past the main entrance. Durrant stopped, glanced around indecisively, then began to wander through the showcases as he pondered something.

Mr Goddard made his way out, and casually sidled up to Durrant.

„Fine day, isn‘t it?“ he remarked. „Everybody‘s starting to think about their holidays.“

Durrant nodded absently, examining a display of alpine equipment in the sports-goods window. „Are they? Good.“

„You going away, Mr Durrant? South of France again, I suppose.“

„What? No, I don‘t think we will be this year.“ Durrant began to move off, but Mr Goddard caught up with him.

„Sorry to hear that, Mr Durrant. I thought you deserved a good holiday abroad. Nothing the trouble, I hope.“ He looked searchingly into Durrant‘s face. „If I can

help at all, do let me know. I'd be glad to make you a small loan. An old man like me, hasn't much use for it."

Durrant stopped and peered thoughtfully at Mr Goddard. „That's kind of you, Goddard," he said at last. „Very kind."

Mr Goddard smiled deprecatingly. „Don't give it a thought. I like to stand by the firm, you know. Forgive me mentioning it, but would fifty be any use to you?"

Durrant's eyes narrowed slightly. „Yes, it would be a lot of use." He paused, then asked quietly: „Are you doing this off your own bat, or did Sellings put you up to it?"

„Put me up to it—?"

Durrant closed the interval between them, and in a harder voice rapped out: „You must have been following me around for days. You know just about everything about everybody, don't you, Goddard? I've a damn good mind to report you."

Mr Goddard backed away, wondering how to retrieve the situation. Just then he noticed that they were alone at the showcases. The groups of people who usually milled around the windows were pressing into the alleyway beside the store; there was a lot of shouting in the distance.

„What the hell's going on?" Durrant snapped. He joined the crowd in the alleyway and peered over the heads.

Mr Goddard hurried back into the store. All the assistants were craning over their shoulders and whispering to each other; some had left the counters and were gathering around the service doors at the rear.

Mr Goddard pushed his way through, someone was calling for the police and a woman from the personnel department came down in the freight lift carrying a pair of blankets.

The commissionaire holding the throng back let Mr Goddard past. In the yard outside was a group of fifteen or twenty people, all looking up at the fifth-floor balcony. Tied to the railings was the lower half of a home-made ladder, jutting up into the air at an angle of 45 degrees. The top section, a limb about twelve feet long, had been lashed to the upper end, but the joint had failed, and the section now hung down vertically, swinging slowly from side to side above the heads of the people in the yard.

With an effort Mr Goddard controlled his voice. Someone had covered the two bodies with the blankets, and a man kneeling beside them presumably a doctor—was shaking his head slowly.

„What I can't understand," one of the assistant managers was whispering to the commissionaire, „is where they were trying to climb to. The ladder must have pointed straight up into the air."

The commissionaire nodded. „Mr Masterman and Mr Streatfield, too. What would they be building a ladder for, senior men like that?"

Mr Goddard followed the line of the ladder up towards the sky. The rear wall of the yard was only seven or eight feet high, beyond it lay the galvanized iron roof of a bicycle shed and an open car park. The ladder had pointed nowhere, but the compulsion driving the two men had been blind and irresistible.

That evening Mr Goddard made the rounds of his house more perfunctorily than usual, glanced briefly into the empty rooms, closing the doors before the cat had a

chance to do more than test the air. He shut it into the kitchen, then hurried off to unlock the safe.

Carrying the box out into the centre of the floor, he unlatched the lid.

As the town came to life below him he scrutinized it carefully, moving up and down the miniature streets, peering through all the windows in turn, fixing the identity and role of as many as possible of the tiny inhabitants. Like a thousand shuttles weaving an infinitely intricate pattern, they threaded through the shops and offices, in and out of countless doorways, every one of them touching a score of others somewhere among the pavements and arcades, adding another stitch to the tapestry of incident and motive ravelling their lives together. Mr Goddard traced each thread, trying to detect any shift in direction, and untoward interlocking of behaviour.

The pattern, he realized, was changing. As yet it was undefined, but slight variations were apparent, subtle shifts in the relationships between the people in the box: rival storekeepers seemed to be on intimate terms, strangers had begun to talk to each other, there was a great deal of unnecessary and purposeless activity.

Mr Goddard searched for a focus, an incident that would unmask the sources of the new pattern. He examined the balcony behind the lift shaft, watching for any further attempts to escape. The ladder had been removed but nothing had been done to replace it. Other potential escape routes the roof of the cinema, the clock tower of the town hail—revealed no further clues.

One incident alone stood out, puzzling him even more. This was the unique spectacle, in a quiet alcove of the billiards saloon, of Mr Durrant introducing his bank manager to the bookmaker. The trio were still in earnest conversation when he closed the box reluctantly at two o'clock the next morning.

Over the following days Mr Goddard watched the crowds passing through the store, waiting to detect, as it were in the macrocosm, some of the tendencies he had observed in the box. His sixty-fifth birthday, soon due to fall, was a handy topic which provided ready conversational access to the senior members of the staff. Curiously, however, the friendly responses he expected were missing; the exchanges were brief, sometimes almost to the point of rudeness. This he put down to the changed atmosphere in the store since the deaths of the two ladder climbers. At the inquest there had been a confused hysterical outburst by one of the saleswomen, and the coroner had cryptically remarked that it appeared that information was being deliberately withheld. A murmur of agreement had spontaneously swept the entire room, but what exactly he meant no one seemed to know.

Another symptom of this uneasiness was the rash of notices that were handed in. Almost a third of the staff were due to leave, most of them for reasons that were patently little more than excuses. When Mr Goddard probed for the real reasons he discovered that few people were aware of them. The motivation was purely unconscious.

As if to emphasize this intrusion of the irrational, one evening as Mr Goddard was leaving the store he saw the bank manager standing high above the street on the clock tower of the town hall, gazing up into the sky.

During the next week little occurred within the box to clarify the situation. The shifting and regrouping of relationships continued. He saw the bank manager more and more in the company of the bookmaker, and realized that he had been completely mistaken in assuming that Durrant was under pressure of his gambling debts—in fact, his role seemed to be that of intermediary between the bookmaker and bank manager, who had at last been persuaded to join them in their scheme.

That some sort of conspiracy was afoot he was sure. At first he assumed that a mass break-out from the box was being planned, but nothing confirmed this. Rather he felt that some obscure compulsion, as yet unidentified to itself, was generating within the minds of those in the box, reflected in the bizarre and unpredictable behaviour of their counterparts in the outside world. Unconscious of their own motives and only half aware of themselves, his fellow employees at the store had begun to resemble the pieces of some enormous puzzle, like disjointed images fixed in the fragments of a shattered mirror. In conclusion he decided on a policy of laissez-faire. A few more weeks would certainly reveal the sources of the conspiracy.

Unfortunately, sooner than Mr Goddard anticipated, events moved forward rapidly to a spectacular crisis.

The day of his sixty-fifth birthday, he made his way to the store half an hour later than usual, and on arrival was told that Mr Sellings wished to see him.

Sellings first offered his congratulations, then launched into a recapitulation of Mr Goddard‘s years of service to the store, and concluded by wishing him as many years again of contented retirement.

It took Mr Goddard several moments to grasp the real significance of this. Nothing had ever been said to him about his retirement, and he had always assumed that he would stay on until, like many members of the staff, he was well into his seventies.

Collecting himself, he said as much to Sellings. „I haven‘t exactly been expecting retirement, Mr Sellings. I think there must have been some mistake.“

Sellings stood up, shaking his head with a quick smile. „No mistake at all, Mr Goddard, I assure you. As a matter of fact the board carefully considered your case yesterday, and we agreed that you well deserve an uninterrupted rest after all these years.“

Mr Goddard frowned. „But I don‘t wish to retire, sir. I‘ve made no plans.“

„Well, now‘s the time to start.“ Sellings was on his way to the door, handshake ready. „Comfortable pension, little house of your own, the world‘s your oyster.“

Mr Goddard sat tight, thinking quickly. „Mr Sellings, I‘m afraid I can‘t accept the board‘s decision. I‘m sure, for the sake of the business, I should stay on in my present post.“ The smile had gone from Sellings‘ face; he looked impatient and irritable. „If you were to ask the floor managers and assistants, not to speak of the customers, they would all insist that I stay on. They would be very shocked at the suggestion of retirement.“

„Would they?“ Sellings asked curtly. „My information is to the contrary. Believe me, your retirement has come at a very lucky time for you, Mr Goddard. I‘ve had a great number of complaints recently that otherwise I should have been obliged to act upon. Promptly and drastically.“

As he left the accounts department for the last time Mr Goddard numbly repeated these words to himself. He found them almost impossible to believe. And yet Sellings was a responsible man who would never take a single opinion on such an important matter. Somehow, though, he was colossally in error.

Or was he? As he made his farewell rounds, half-hoping that the news of his sudden retirement would rally support to him, Mr Goddard realized that Sellings was right. Floor by floor, department by department, counter by counter, he recognized the same inner expression, the same attitude of tacit approval. They were all glad he was going. Not one of them showed real regret; a good number slipped away before he could shake hands with them, others merely grunted briefly. Several of the older hands, who had known Mr Goddard for twenty or thirty years, seemed slightly embarrassed, but none of them offered a word of sympathy.

Finally, when one group in the furniture department deliberately turned their backs to avoid speaking to him, Mr Goddard cut short his tour. Stunned and humiliated, he collected his few possessions from his locker and made his way out.

It seemed to take him all day to reach his house. Head down, he walked slowly along the quiet side-streets, oblivious of the passers-by, pathetically trying to absorb this blow to all he had assumed about himself for so many years. His interest in other people was sincere and unaffected, he knew without doubt. Countless times he had gone out of his way to be of help to others, had put endless thought into arriving at the best solutions to their problems. But with what result? He had aroused only contempt, envy and distrust.

On his doorstep the cat waited patiently. Surprised to see him so early it ran forward, purring and rubbing itself against his legs as he latched the gate. But Mr Goddard failed to notice it. Fumbling, he unlocked the kitchen door, closed it automatically behind him. Taking off his coat, he made himself some tea, and without thinking poured a saucer of milk for the cat. He watched it drink, still trying helplessly to understand the antagonism he had aroused in so many people.

Suddenly he pushed his tea away and went to the door. Without bothering to go upstairs he made his way straight into the lounge. Switching on the light, he stared heavily at the safe. Somewhere here, he knew, was the reason for his dismissal that morning. If only his eyes were sharp enough, he would discover it.

Unlocking the safe, he unclasped the door and pulled it back abruptly, wrenching himself slightly against its great inertia. Impatient to open the box he ignored the twinge in his shoulder, reached down and seized the butterfly handles.

As he swung the box out of the safe he realized that its weight was, momentarily, too much for him. Trying to brace himself, he edged one knee under the box and leaned his elbows on the lid, his shoulder against the safe.

The position was awkward, and he could only support it for a few seconds. Heaving again at the box, in an effort to replace it in the safe, he suddenly began to feel dizzy. A small spiral revolved before his eyes, gradually thickening into a deep black whirlpool that filled his head.

Before he could restrain it, the box tore itself from his hands and plunged to the floor with a violent metallic clatter.

Kneeling beside the safe, Mr Goddard slumped back limply against the wall, head lolling onto his chest.

The box lay on its side, just within the circle of light. The impact had forced the catches on the lid, and this was now open; a single narrow beam reflected off the under-surface into the interior of the box.

For a few minutes the room was quiet, except for the laboured uneven sounds of Mr Goddard‘s breathing. Then, almost imperceptibly, something moved in the interval between the lid and the floor. A small figure stepped tentatively out of the shadow, peered around itself in the full glare of the light, and disappeared again. Ten seconds later three more figures emerged, followed by others. In small groups they spread out across the floor, their tiny legs and arms rippling in the light. Behind them a score more appeared, pressing out in a solid stream, pushing past each other to escape from the box. Soon the circle of light was alive with swarms of the tiny figures, flickering like minnows in a floodlit pool.

In the darkness by the corner, the door creaked sharply. Together, the hundreds of figures froze. Eyes glinting suspiciously, the head of Mr Goddard‘s cat swung round into the room. For a moment it paused, assessing the scene before it.

A sharp cry hissed through its teeth. With vicious speed, it bounded forward.

It was several hours later that Mr Goddard pulled himself slowly to his feet. Leaning weakly against the safe, he looked down at the upended safe beneath the bright cone of light. Carefully collecting himself, he rubbed his cheekbones and painfully massaged his chest and shoulders. Then he limped across to the box and steered it back onto its base. Gingerly, he lifted the lid and peered inside.

Abruptly he dropped the lid, glanced around the floor, swinging the light so that it swept the far corners. Then he turned and hurried out into the hall, switched on the light and examined the floor carefully, along the skirting boards and behind the grilles.

Over his shoulder he noticed that the kitchen door was open. He crossed to it and stepped in on tiptoe, eyes ranging between the table and chair legs, behind the broom and coal bucket.

„Sinbad!“ Mr Goddard shouted.

Startled, the cat dropped the tiny object between its paws and backed away below the couch.

Mr Goddard bent down. He stared hard at the object for a few seconds, then stood up and leaned against the cupboard, his eyes closing involuntarily.

The cat pounced, its teeth flickering at its paws. It gulped noisily.

„Sinbad,“ Mr Goddard said in a quieter voice. He gazed listlessly at the cat, finally stepped over to the door.

„Come outside,“ he called to it.

The cat followed him, its tail whipping slowly from side to side. They walked down the pathway to the gate. Mr Goddard looked at his watch. It was 2.45, early afternoon. The houses around him were silent, the sky a distant, pacific blue. Here and there sunlight was reflected off one of the upstairs bay windows, but the street was motionless, its stillness absolute and unbroken.

Mr Goddard gestured the cat onto the pavement and closed the gate behind it.

Together they walked out into an empty world.